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# THE VANISHED MESSENGER.

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With every muscle of his body and neck he strained and strained.

FRONTISPIECE. *See page 318*

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THE WORKS OF

# E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

## THE VANISHED MESSENGER

New York
The Review of Reviews Co.
1920

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# THE VANISHED MESSENGER

## CHAPTER I

There were very few people upon Platform Number Twenty-one of Liverpool Street Station at a quarter to nine on the evening of April 2 — possibly because the platform in question is one of the most remote and least used in the great terminus. The station-master, however, was there himself, with an inspector in attendance. A dark, thick-set man, wearing a long travelling ulster and a Homburg hat, and carrying in his hand a brown leather dressing-case, across which was painted in black letters the name MR. JOHN P. DUNSTER, was standing a few yards away, smoking a long cigar, and to all appearance absorbed in studying the advertisements which decorated the grimy wall on the other side of the single track. A couple of porters were seated upon a barrow which contained one solitary portmanteau. There were no signs of other passengers, no other luggage. As a matter of fact, according to the time-table, no train was due to leave the station or to arrive at it, on this particular platform, for several hours.

Down at the other end of the platform the wooden

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barrier was thrust back, and a porter with some luggage upon a barrow made his noisy approach. He was followed by a tall young man in a grey tweed suit and a straw hat on which were the colours of a famous cricket club.

The inspector watched them curiously. "Lost his way, I should think," he observed.

The station-master nodded. "It looks like the young man who missed the boat train," he remarked. "Perhaps he has come to beg a lift."

The young man in question made steady progress up the platform. His hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his coat, and his forehead was contracted in a frown. As he approached more closely, he singled out Mr. John P. Dunster, and motioning his porter to wait, crossed to the edge of the track and addressed him.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, sir?"

Mr. John P. Dunster turned at once and faced his questioner. He did so without haste — with a certain deliberation, in fact — yet his eyes were suddenly bright and keen. He was neatly dressed, with the quiet precision which seems as a rule to characterise the travelling American. He was apparently of a little less than middle-age, clean-shaven, broad-shouldered, with every appearance of physical strength. He seemed like a man on wires, a man on the alert, likely to miss nothing.

"Are you Mr. John P. Dunster?" the youth asked.

"I carry my visiting-card in my hand, sir," the other replied, swinging his dressing-case around. "My name is John P. Dunster."

The young man's expression was scarcely ingrati-

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ating. To a natural sullenness was added now the nervous distaste of one who approaches a disagreeable task.

"I want, if I may, to ask you a favour," he continued. "If you don't feel like granting it, please say no and I'll be off at once. I am on my way to The Hague. I was to have gone by the boat train which left half an hour ago. I had taken a seat, and they assured me that the train would not leave for at least ten minutes, as the mails weren't in. I went down the platform to buy some papers and stood talking for a moment or two with a man whom I know. I suppose I must have been longer than I thought, or they must have been quicker than they expected with the mail-bags. Anyhow, when I came back the train was moving. They would not let me jump in. I could have done it easily, but that fool of an inspector over there held me."

"They are very strict in this country, I know," Mr. Dunster agreed, without change of expression. "Please go on."

"I saw you arrive — just too late for the train. While I was swearing at the inspector, I heard you speak to the station-master. Since then I have made inquiries. I understand that you have ordered a special train to Harwich."

Mr. John P. Dunster said nothing, only his keen, clear eyes seemed all the time to be questioning this gloomy-looking but apparently harmless young man.

"I went to the station-master's office," the latter continued, "and tried to persuade them to let me ride in the guard's van of your special, but he made a stupid fuss about it, so I thought I'd better come

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to you. Can I beg a seat in your compartment, q anywhere in the train, as far as Harwich?"

Mr. Dunster avoided, for the moment, a direct re ply. He had the air of a man who, whether reason ably or unreasonably, disliked the request which had been made to him.

"You are particularly anxious to cross to-night?" he asked.

"I am," the youth admitted emphatically. "I never ought to have risked missing the train. I am due at The Hague to-morrow."

Mr. John P. Dunster moved his position a little. The light from a rain-splashed gas lamp shone now full upon the face of his suppliant: a boy's face, which would have been pleasant and even handsome but for the discontented mouth, the lowering fore-head, and a shadow in the eyes, as though, boy though he certainly was in years, he had already, at some time or another, looked upon the serious things of life. His nervousness, too, was almost grotesque. He had the air of disliking immensely this asking a favour from a stranger. Mr. Dunster appreciated all these things, but there were reasons which made him slow in granting the young man's request.

"What is the nature of your pressing business at The Hague?" he asked.

The youth hesitated.

"I am afraid," he said grimly, "that you will not think it of much importance. I am on my way to play in a golf tournament there."

"A golf tournament at The Hague!" Mr. Dunster repeated, in a slightly altered tone. "What is your name?"

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"Gerald Fentolin."

Mr. Dunster stood quite still for a moment. He was possessed of a wonderful memory, and he was conscious at that moment of a subtle appeal to it. Fentolin! There was something in the name which seemed to him somehow associated with the things against which he was on guard. He stood with puzzled frown, reminiscent for several minutes, unsuccessful. Then he suddenly smiled, and moving underneath the gas lamp, shook open an evening paper which he had been carrying. He turned over the pages until he arrived at the sporting items. Here, in almost the first paragraph, he saw the name which had happened to catch his eye a moment or two before:

GOLF AT THE HAGUE

Among the entrants for the tournament which commences to-morrow, are several well-known English players, including Mr. Barwin, Mr. Parrott, Mr. Hillard and Mr. Gerald Fentolin.

Mr. Dunster folded up the newspaper and replaced it in his pocket. He turned towards the young man.

"So you're a golfer, are you?"

"I play a bit," was the somewhat indifferent reply.

Mr. Dunster turned to another part of the paper and pointed to the great black head-lines.

"Seems a queer thing for a young fellow like you to be worrying about games," he remarked. "I haven't been in this country more than a few hours, but I expected to find all the young men getting ready."

"Getting ready for what?"

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"Why, to fight, of course," Mr. Dunster replied. "Seems pretty clear that there's an expeditionary force being fitted out, according to this evening's paper, somewhere up in the North Sea. The only Englishman I've spoken to on this side was willing to lay me odds that war would be declared within a week."

The young man's lack of interest was curious.

"I am not in the army," he said. "It really doesn't affect me."

Mr. Dunster stared at him.

"You'll forgive my curiosity," he said, "but say, is there nothing you could get into and fight if this thing came along?"

"Nothing at all, that I know of," the youth replied coolly. "War is an affair which concerns only the military and naval part of two countries. The civil population —"

"Plays golf, I suppose," Mr. Dunster interrupted. "Young man, I haven't been in England for some years, and you rather take my breath away. All the same, you can come along with me as far as Harwich."

The young man showed signs of some satisfaction.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," he declared. "I promise you I won't be in the way."

The station-master, who had been looking through a little pile of telegrams brought to him by a clerk from his office, now turned towards them. His expression was a little grave.

"Your special will be backing down directly, sir," he announced, "but I am sorry to say that we hear very bad accounts of the line. They say that this is only the fag-end of the storm that we are getting

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here, and that it's been raging for nearly twenty-four hours on the east coast. I doubt whether the Harwich boat will be able to put off."

"We must take our chance about that," Dunster remarked. "If the mail boat doesn't run, I presume there will be something else we can charter."

The station-master looked the curiosity which he did not actually express in words.

"Money will buy most things, nowadays, sir," he observed, "but if it isn't fit for our mail boat, it certainly isn't fit for anything else that can come into Harwich Harbour. However, you'll hear what they say when you get there."

Mr. Dunster nodded and relapsed into a taciturnity which was obviously one of his peculiarities. The young man strolled down the platform, and catching up with the inspector, touched him on the shoulder.

"Do you know who the fellow is?" he asked curiously. "It's awfully decent of him to let me go with him, but he didn't seem very keen about it."

The inspector shook his head.

"No idea, sir," he replied. "He drove up just two minutes after the train had gone, came straight into the office and ordered a special. Paid for it, too, in Bank of England notes before he went out. I fancy he's an American, and he gave his name as John P. Dunster."

The young man paused to light a cigarette.

"If he's an American, I suppose that accounts for it," he observed. "He must be in a precious hurry to get somewhere, though."

"A night like this, too!" the inspector remarked, with a shiver. "I wouldn't leave London myself un-

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less I had to. They say there's a tremendous storm blowing on the east coast. Here comes the train, sir — just one saloon and the guard's van."

The little train backed slowly along the platform side. The engine was splashed with mud and soaking wet. The faces of the engine-driver and his companion shone from the dripping rain. The station-master held open the door of the saloon.

"You've a rough journey before you, sir," he said. "You'll catch the boat all right, though — if it goes. The mail train was very heavy to-night. You should catch her up this side of Colchester."

Mr. Dunster nodded.

"I am taking this young gentleman with me," he announced shortly. "It seems that he, too, missed the train. I am much obliged to you, station-master, for your attention. Good night!"

They were about to start when Mr. Dunster once more let down the window.

"By the way," he said, "as it is such a wild night, you will oblige me very much if you will tell the engine-driver that there will be a five pound note for himself and his companion if we catch the mail. Inspector!"

The inspector touched his hat. The station-master had turned discreetly away. He had been an inspector himself once, and sovereigns had been useful to him, too. Then the train glided from the platform side, plunged with a scream through a succession of black tunnels, and with rapidly increasing speed faced the storm.

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# CHAPTER II

The young man sat on one side of the saloon and Mr. John P. Dunster on the other. Although both of them were provided with a certain amount of railway literature, neither of them made any pretence at reading. The older man, with his feet upon the opposite seat and his arms folded, was looking pensively through the rain-splashed window-pane into the impenetrable darkness. The young man, although he could not ignore his companion's unsociable instincts, was fidgety.

"There will be some floods out to-morrow," he remarked.

Mr. Dunster turned his head and looked across the saloon. There was something in the deliberate manner of his doing so, and his hesitation before he spoke, which seemed intended to further impress upon the young man the fact that he was not disposed for conversation.

"Very likely," was his sole reply.

Gerald Fentolin sighed as though he regretted his companion's taciturnity and a few minutes later strolled to the farther end of the saloon. He spent some time trying to peer through the streaming window into the darkness. He chatted for a few minutes with the guard, who was, however, in a bad temper at having had to turn out and who found little to say. Then he took one of his golf clubs from the bag and

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indulged in several half swings. Finally he stretched himself out upon one of the seats and closed his eyes.

"May as well try to get a nap," he yawned. "There won't be much chance on the steamer, if it blows like this."

Mr. Dunster said nothing. His face was set, his eyes were looking somewhere beyond the confines of the saloon in which he was seated. So they travelled for over an hour. The young man seemed to be dozing in earnest when, with a succession of jerks, the train rapidly slackened speed. Mr. Dunster let down the window. The interior of the carriage was at once thrown into confusion. A couple of newspapers were caught up and whirled around, a torrent of rain beat in. Mr. Dunster rapidly closed the window and rang the bell. The guard came in after a moment or two. His clothes were shiny from the wet; rain-drops hung from his beard.

"What is the matter?" Mr. Dunster demanded. "Why are we waiting here?"

"There's a block on the line somewhere, sir," the man replied. "Can't tell where exactly. The signals are against us; that's all we know at present."

They crawled on again in about ten minutes, stopped, and resumed their progress at an even slower rate. Mr. Dunster once more summoned the guard.

"Why are we travelling like this?" he asked impatiently. "We shall never catch the boat."

"We shall catch the boat all right if it runs, sir," the man assured him. "The mail is only a mile or two ahead of us; that's one reason why we have to go so slowly. Then the water is right over the line where we are now, and we can't get any news at all

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from the other side of Ipswich. If it goes on like this, some of the bridges will be down; that's what I'm afraid of."

Mr. Dunster frowned. For the first time he showed some signs of uneasiness.

"Perhaps," he muttered, half to himself, "a motor-car would have been better."

"Not on your life," his young companion intervened. "All the roads to the coast here cross no end of small bridges — much weaker affairs than the railway bridges. I bet there are some of those down already. Besides, you wouldn't be able to see where you were going, on a night like this."

"There appears to be a chance," Mr. Dunster remarked drily, "that you will have to scratch for your competition to-morrow."

"Also," the young man observed, "that you will have taken this special train for nothing. I can't fancy the Harwich boat going out a night like this."

Mr. Dunster relapsed into stony but anxious silence. The train continued its erratic progress, sometimes stopping altogether for a time, with whistle blowing repeatedly; sometimes creeping along the metals as though feeling its way to safety. At last, after a somewhat prolonged wait, the guard, whose hoarse voice they had heard on the platform of the small station in which they were standing, entered the carriage. With him came a gust of wind, once more sending the papers flying around the compartment. The rain dripped from his clothes on to the carpet. He had lost his hat, his hair was tossed with the wind, his face was bleeding from a slight wound on the temple.

"The boat train's just ahead of us, sir," he an-

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nounced. "She can't get on any better than we can. We've just heard that there's a bridge down on the line between Ipswich and Harwich."

"What are we going to do, then?" Mr. Dunster demanded.

"That's just what I've come to ask you, sir," the guard replied. "The mail's going slowly on as far as Ipswich. I fancy they'll lie by there until the morning. The best thing that I can see is, if you're agreeable, to take you back to London. We can very likely do that all right, if we start at once."

Mr. Dunster, ignoring the man's suggestion, drew from one of the voluminous pockets of his ulster a small map. He spread it open upon the table before him and studied it attentively.

"If I cannot get to Harwich," he asked, "is there any possibility of keeping straight on and reaching Yarmouth?"

The guard hesitated.

"We haven't heard anything about the line from Ipswich to Norwich, sir," he replied, "but we can't very well change our course without definite instructions."

"Your definite instructions," Mr. Dunster reminded him drily, "were to take me to Harwich. You have been forced to depart from them. I see no harm in your adopting any suggestions I may have to make concerning our altered destination. I will pay the extra mileage, naturally."

"How far did you wish to go, sir?" the guard enquired.

"To Yarmouth," Mr. Dunster replied firmly. "If there are bridges down, and communication with Har-

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wich is blocked, Yarmouth would suit me better than anywhere."

The guard shook his head.

"I couldn't go on that way, sir, without instructions."

"Is there a telegraph office at this station?" Mr. Dunster inquired.

"We can speak anywhere on the line," the guard replied.

"Then wire to the station-master at Liverpool Street," Mr. Dunster instructed. "You can get a reply from him in the course of a few minutes. Explain the situation and tell him what my wishes are."

The guard hesitated.

"It's a goodish way from here to Norwich," he observed, "and for all we know —"

"When we left Liverpool Street Station," Mr. Dunster interrupted, "I promised five pounds each to you, the engine-driver, and his mate. That five pounds shall be made twenty-five if you succeed in getting me to the coast. Do your best for me."

The guard raised his hat and departed without another word.

"It will probably suit you better," Mr. Dunster continued, turning to his companion, "to leave me at Ipswich and join the mail."

The latter shook his head.

"I don't see that there's any chance, anyway, of my getting over in time now," he remarked. "If you'll take me on with you as far as Norwich, I can go quietly home from there."

"You live in this part of the world, then?" Mr. Dunster asked.

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The young man assented. Again there was a certain amount of hesitation in his manner.

"I live some distance the other side of Norwich," he said. "I don't want to sponge on you too much," he went on, "but if you're really going to stick it out and try and get there, I'd like to go on, too. I am afraid I can't offer to share the expense, but I'd work my passage if there was anything to be done."

Mr. Dunster drummed for a moment upon the table with his fingers. All the time the young man had been speaking, his eyes had been studying his face. He turned now once more to his map.

"It was my idea," he said, "to hire a steam trawler from Yarmouth. If I do so, you can, if you wish, accompany me so far as the port at which we may land in Holland. On the other hand, to be perfectly frank with you, I should prefer to go alone. There will be, no doubt, a certain amount of risk in crossing tonight. My own business is of importance. A golf tournament, however, is scarcely worth risking your life for, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know about that!" the young man replied grimly. "I fancy I should rather like it Let's see whether we can get on to Norwich, anyhow, shall we? We may find that there are bridges down on that line."

They relapsed once more into silence. Presently the guard reappeared.

"Instructions to take you on to Yarmouth, if possible, sir," he announced, "and to collect the mileage at our destination."

"That will be quite satisfactory," Mr. Dunster

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agreed. "Let us be off, then, as soon as possible."

Presently they crawled on. They passed the boat train in Ipswich Station, where they stayed for a few moments. Mr. Dunster bought wine and sandwiches, and his companion followed his example. Then they continued their journey. An hour or more passed; the storm showed no signs of abatement. Their speed now rarely exceeded ten or fifteen miles an hour. Mr. Dunster smoked all the time, occasionally rubbing the window-pane and trying to look out. Gerald Fentolin slept fitfully.

"Have you any idea where we are?" Mr. Dunster asked once.

The boy cautiously let down the window a little way. With the noise of the storm came another sound, to which he listened for a moment with puzzled face: a dull, rumbling sound like the falling of water. He closed the window, breathless.

"I don't think we are far from Norwich. We passed Forncett, anyhow, some time ago."

"Still raining?"

"In torrents! I can't see a yard ahead of me. I bet we get some floods after this. I expect they are out now, if one could only see."

They crept on. Suddenly, above the storm, they heard what sounded at first like the booming of a gun, and then a shrill whistle from some distance ahead. They felt the jerk as their brakes were hastily applied, the swaying of the little train, and then the crunching of earth beneath them, the roar of escaping steam as their engine ploughed its way on into the road bed.

"Off the rails!" the boy cried, springing to his

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feet. "Hold on tightly, sir. I'd keep away from the window."

The carriage swayed and rocked. Suddenly a telegraph post seemed to come crashing through the window and the polished mahogany panels. The young man escaped it by leaping to one side. It caught Mr. Dunster, who had just risen to his feet, upon the forehead. There was a crash all around of splitting glass, a further shock. They were both thrown off their feet. The light was suddenly extinguished. With the crashing of glass, the splitting of timber — a hideous, tearing sound — the wrecked saloon, dragging the engine half-way over with it, slipped down a low embankment and lay on its side, what remained of it, in a field of turnips.

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# CHAPTER III

As the young man staggered to his feet, he had somehow a sense of detachment, as though he were commencing a new life, or had suddenly come into a new existence. Yet his immediate surroundings were charged with ugly reminiscences. Through a great gap in the ruined side of the saloon the rain was tearing in. As he stood up, his head caught the fragments of the roof. He was able to push back the wreckage with ease and step out. For a moment he reeled, as he met the violence of the storm. Then, clutching hold of the side of the wreck, he steadied himself. A light was moving back and forth, close at hand. He cried out weakly: "Hullo!"

A man carrying a lantern, bent double as he made his way against the wind, crawled up to them. He was a porter from the station close at hand.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Any one alive here?"

"I'm all right," Gerald muttered, "at least, I suppose I am. What's it all — what's it all about? We've had an accident."

The porter caught hold of a piece of the wreckage with which to steady himself.

"Your train ran right into three feet of water," he answered. "The rails had gone — torn up. The telegraph line's down."

"Why didn't you stop the train?"

"We were doing all we could," the man retorted

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gloomily. "We weren't expecting anything else through to-night. We'd a man along the line with a lantern, but he's just been found blown over the embankment, with his head in a pool of water. Any one else in your carriage?"

"One gentleman travelling with me," Gerald answered. "We'd better try to get him out. What about the guard and engine-driver?"

"The engine-driver and stoker are both alive," the porter told him. "I came across them before I saw you. They're both knocked sort of sillylike, but they aren't much hurt. The guard's stone dead."

"Where are we?"

"A few hundred yards from Wymondham. Let's have a look for the other gentleman."

Mr. John P. Dunster was lying quite still, his right leg doubled up, and a huge block of telegraph post, which the saloon had carried with it in its fall, still pressing against his forehead. He groaned as they dragged him out and laid him down upon a cushion in the shelter of the wreckage.

"He's alive all right," the porter remarked. "There's a doctor on the way. Let's cover him up quick and wait."

"Can't we carry him to shelter of some sort?" Gerald proposed.

The man shook his head. Speech of any sort was difficult. Even with his lips close to the other's ears, he had almost to shout.

"Couldn't be done," he replied. "It's all one can do to walk alone when you get out in the middle of the field, away from the shelter of the embankment here. There's bits of trees flying all down the lane.

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Never was such a night! Folks is fair afraid of the morning to see what's happened. There's a mill blown right over on its side in the next field, and the man in charge of it lying dead. This poor chap's bad enough."

Gerald, on all fours, had crept back into the compartment. The bottle of wine was smashed into atoms. He came out, dragging the small dressing-case which his companion had kept on the table before him. One side of it was dented in, but the lock, which was of great strength, still held.

"Perhaps there's a flask somewhere in this dressing-case," Gerald said. "Lend me a knife."

Strong though it had been, the lock was already almost torn out from its foundation. They forced the spring and opened it. The porter turned his lantern on the widening space. Just as Gerald was raising the lid very slowly to save the contents from being scattered by the wind, the man turned his head to answer an approaching hail. Gerald raised the lid a little higher and suddenly closed it with a bang.

"There's folks coming at last!" the porter exclaimed, turning around excitedly. "They've been a time and no mistake. The village isn't a quarter of a mile away. Did you find a flask, sir?"

Gerald made no answer. The dressing-case once more was closed, and his hand pressed upon the lid. The porter turned the light upon his face and whistled softly.

"You're about done yourself, sir," he remarked. "Hold up."

He caught the young man in his arms. There was another roar in Gerald's ears besides the roar of the

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wind. He had never fainted in his life, but the feeling was upon him now — a deadly sickness, a swaying of the earth. The porter suddenly gave a little cry.

"If I'm not a born idiot!" he exclaimed, drawing a bottle from the pocket of his coat with his disengaged hand. "There's whisky here. I was taking it home to the missis for her rheumatism. Now, then."

He drew the cork from the bottle with his teeth and forced some of the liquid between the lips of the young man. The voices now were coming nearer and nearer. Gerald made a desperate effort.

"I am all right," he declared. "Let's look after him."

They groped their way towards the unconscious man, Gerald still gripping the dressing-case with both hands. There were no signs of any change in his condition, but he was still breathing heavily. Then they heard a shout behind, almost in their ears. The porter staggered to his feet.

"It's all right now, sir!" he exclaimed. "They've brought blankets and a stretcher and brandy. Here's a doctor, sir."

A powerful-looking man, hatless, and wrapped in a great ulster, moved towards them.

"How many are there of you?" he asked, as he bent over Mr. Dunster.

"Only we two," Gerald replied. "Is my friend badly hurt?"

"Concussion," the doctor announced. "We'll take him to the village. What about you, young man? Your face is bleeding, I see."

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"Just a cut," Gerald faltered; "nothing else."

"Lucky chap," the doctor remarked. "Let's get him to shelter of some sort. Come along. There's an inn at the corner of the lane there."

They all staggered along, Gerald still clutching the dressing-case, and supported on the other side by an excited and somewhat incoherent villager.

"Such a storm as never was," the latter volunteered. "The telegraph wires are all down for miles and miles. There won't be no trains running along this line come many a week, and as for trees — why, it's as though some one had been playing ninepins in Squire Fellowes's park. When the morning do come, for sure there will be things to be seen. This way, sir. Be careful of the gate."

They staggered along down the lane, climbing once over a tree which lay across the lane and far into the adjoining field. Soon they were joined by more of the villagers, roused from their beds by rumours of terrible happenings. The little, single-storey, ivy-covered inn was all lit up and the door held firmly open. They passed through the narrow entrance and into the stone-flagged barroom, where the men laid down their stretcher. As many of the villagers as could crowd in filled the passage. Gerald sank into a chair. The sudden absence of wind was almost disconcerting. He felt himself once more in danger of fainting. He was only vaguely conscious of drinking hot milk, poured from a jug by a red-faced and sympathetic woman. Its restorative effect, however, was immediate and wonderful. The mist cleared from before his eyes, his brain began to work. Always in the background the horror and the shame were there, the

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shame which kept his hand pressed with unnatural strength upon the broken lock of that dressing-case. He sat a little apart from the others and listened. Above the confused murmur of voices he could hear the doctor's comment and brief orders, as he rose to his feet after examining the unconscious man.

"An ordinary concussion," he declared. "I must get round and see the engine-driver now. They have got him in a shed by the embankment. I'll call in again later on. Let's have one more look at you, young man."

He glanced at the cut on Gerald's forehead, noted the access of colour in his cheeks, and nodded.

"Born to be hanged, you were," he pronounced. "You've had a marvellous escape. I'll be in again presently. No need to worry about your friend. He looks as though he'd got a mighty constitution. Light my lantern, Brown. Two of you had better come with me to the shed. It's no night for a man to be wandering about alone."

He departed, and many of the villagers with him. The landlady sat down and began to weep.

"Such a night! Such a night!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands. "And there's the doctor talks about putting the poor gentleman to bed! Why, the roof's off the back part of the house, and not a bedroom in the place but mine and John's, and the rain coming in there in torrents. Such a night! It's the judgment of the Lord upon us! That's what it is — the judgment of the Lord!"

"Judgment of the fiddlesticks!" her husband growled. "Can't you light the fire, woman? What's the good of sitting there whining?"

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"Light the fire," she repeated bitterly, "and the chimney lying out in the road! Do you want to suffocate us all, or is the beer still in your head? It's your evil doings, Richard Budden, and others like you, that have brought this upon us. If Mr. Wembley would but come in and pray!"

Her husband scoffed. He was dressed only in his shirt and trousers, his hair rough, his braces hanging down behind.

"Come in and pray!" he repeated. "Not he! Not Mr. Wembley! He's safe tucked up in his bed, shivering with fear, I'll bet you. He's not getting his feet wet to save a body or lend a hand here. Souls are his job. You let the preacher alone, mother, and tell us what we're going to do with this gentleman."

"The Lord only knows!" she cried, wringing her hands.

"Can I hire a motor-car from anywhere near?" Gerald asked.

"There's motor-cars, right enough," the innkeeper replied, "but not many as would be fools enough to take one out. You couldn't see the road, and I doubt if one of them plaguey things would stir in this storm."

"Such nonsense as you talk, Richard Budden!" his wife exclaimed sharply. "It's twenty minutes past three of the clock, and there's light coming on us fast. If so be as the young gentleman knows folks round about here, or happens to live nigh, why shouldn't he take one of them motor-cars and get away to some decent place? It'll be better for the poor gentleman than lying here in a house smitten by the Lord."

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Gerald rose stiffly to his feet. An idea was forming in his brain. His eyes were bright. He looked at the body of John Dunster upon the floor, and felt once more in his pocket.

"How far off is the garage?" he asked.

"It's right across the way," the innkeeper replied, "a speculation of Neighbour Martin's, and a foolish one it do seem to me. He's two cars there, and one he lets to the Government for delivering the mails."

Gerald felt in his pocket and produced a sovereign.

"Give this," he said, "to any man you can find who will go across there and bring me a car — the most powerful they've got, if there's any difference. Tell them I'll pay well. This — my friend will be much better at home with me than in a strange place when he comes to his senses."

"It's sound common sense," the woman declared. "Be off with you, Richard."

The man was looking at the coin covetously, but his wife pushed him away.

"It's not a sovereign .you'll be taking from the gentleman for a little errand like that," she insisted sharply. "He shall pay us for what he's had when he goes, and welcome, and if so be that he's willing to make it a sovereign, to include the milk and the brandy and the confusion we've been put to this night, well and good. It's a heavy reckoning, maybe, but the night calls for it. We'll see about that afterwards. Get along with you, I say, Richard."

"I'll be wet through," the man muttered.

"And serve you right!" the woman exclaimed.

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"If there's a man in this village to-night whose clothes are dry, it's a thing for him to be ashamed of."

The innkeeper reluctantly departed. They heard the roar of the wind as the door was opened and closed. The woman poured out another glass of milk and brought it to Gerald.

"A godless man, mine," she said grimly. "If so happen as Mr. Wembley had come to these parts years ago, I'd have seen myself in my grave before I'd have married a publican. But it's too late now. We're mostly too late about the things that count in this world. So it's your friend that's been stricken down, young man. A well-living man, I hope?"

Gerald shivered ever so slightly. He drank the milk, however. He felt that he might need his strength.

"What train might you have been on?" the woman continued. "There's none due on this line that we knew of. David Bass, the station-master, was here but two hours ago and said he'd finished for the night, and praised the Lord for that. The goods trains had all been stopped at Ipswich, and the first passenger train was not due till six o'clock."

Gerald shook his head with an affectation of weariness.

"I don't know," he replied. "I don't remember anything about it. We were hours late, I think."

The woman was looking down at the unconscious man. Gerald rose slowly to his feet and stood by her side. The face of Mr. John P. Dunster, even in unconsciousness, had something in it of strength and purpose. The shape of his head, the squareness of

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his jaws, the straightness of his thick lips, all seemed to speak of a hard and inflexible disposition. His hair was coal black, coarse, and without the slightest sprinkling of grey. He had the neck and throat of a fighter. But for that single, livid, blue mark across his forehead, he carried with him no signs of his accident. He was a little inclined to be stout. There was a heavy gold chain stretched across his waistcoat. From where he lay, the shining handle of his revolver protruded from his hip pocket.

"Sakes alive!" the woman muttered, as she looked down. "What does he carry a thing like that for — in a peaceful country, too!"

"It was just an idea of his," Gerald answered. "We were going abroad in a day or two. He was always nervous. If you like, I'll take it away."

He stooped down and withdrew it from the unconscious man's pocket. He started as he discovered that it was loaded in every chamber.

"I can't bear the sight of them things," the woman declared. "It's the men of evil ways, who've no trust in the Lord, who need that sort of protection."

They heard the door pushed open, the howl of wind down the passage, and the beating of rain upon the stone flags. Then it was softly closed again. The landlord staggered into the room, followed by a young man.

"This 'ere is Mr. Martin's chaffer," he announced. "You can tell him what you want yerself."

Gerald turned almost eagerly towards the newcomer.

"I want to go to the other side of Holt," he said,

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"and get my friend — get this gentleman away from here — get him home, if possible. Can you take me?"

The chauffeur looked doubtful.

"I'm afraid of the roads, sir," he replied. "There's talk about many bridges down, and trees, and there's floods out everywhere. There's half a foot of water, even, across the village street now. I'm afraid we shouldn't get very far."

"Look here," Gerald begged eagerly, "let's make a shot at it. I'll pay you double the hire of the car, and I'll be responsible for any damage. I want to get out of this beastly place. Let's get somewhere, at any rate, towards a civilised country. I'll see you don't lose anything. I'll give you a five pound note for yourself if we get as far as Holt."

"I'm on," the young man agreed shortly. "It's an open car, you know."

"It doesn't matter," Gerald replied. "I can stick it in front with you, and we can cover — him up in the tonneau."

"You'll wait until the doctor comes back?" the landlord asked.

"And why should they?" his wife interposed sharply. "Them doctors are all the same. He'll try and keep the poor gentleman here for the sake of a few extra guineas, and a miserable place for him to open his eyes upon, even if the rest of the roof holds, which for my part I'm beginning to doubt. They'd have to move him from here with the day-light, anyhow. He can't lie in the bar parlour all day, can he?"

"It don't seem right, somehow," the man com-

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plained doggedly. "The doctor didn't say anything about having him moved."

"You get the car," Gerald ordered the young man. "I'll take the whole responsibility."

The chauffeur silently left the room. Gerald put a couple of sovereigns upon the mantelpiece.

"My friend is a man of somewhat peculiar temperament," he said quietly. "If he finds himself at home in a comfortable room when he comes to his senses, I am quite sure that he will have a better chance of recovery. He cannot possibly be made comfortable here, and he will feel the shock of what has happened all the more if he finds himself still in the neighbourhood when he opens his eyes. If there is any change in his condition, we can easily stop somewhere on the way."

The woman pocketed the two sovereigns.

"That's common sense, sir," she agreed heartily, "and I'm sure we are very much obliged to you. If we had a decent room, and a roof above it, you'd be heartily welcome, but as it is, this is no place for a sick man, and those that say different don't know what they are talking about. That's a real careful young man who's going to take you along in the motor-car. He'll get you there safe, if any one will."

"What I say is," her husband protested sullenly, "that we ought to wait for the doctor's orders. I'm against seeing a poor body like that jolted across the country in an open motor-car, in his state. I'm not sure that it's for his good."

"And what business is it of yours, I should like to know?" the woman demanded sharply. "You get up-stairs and begin moving the furniture from where

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the rain's coming sopping in. And if so be you can remember while you do it that this is a judgment that's come upon us, why, so much the better. We are evil-doers, all of us, though them as likes the easy ways generally manage to forget it."

The man retreated silently. The woman sat down upon a stool and waited. Gerald sat opposite to her, the battered dressing-case upon his knees. Between them was stretched the body of the unconscious man.

"Are you used to prayer, young sir?" the woman asked.

Gerald shook his head, and the woman did not pursue the subject. Only once her eyes were half closed and her words drifted across the room.

"The Lord have mercy on this man, a sinner!"

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# CHAPTER IV

"My advice to you, sir, is to chuck it!"

Gerald turned towards the chauffeur by whose side he was seated a little stiffly, for his limbs were numbed with the cold and exhaustion. The morning had broken with a grey and uncertain light. A vaporous veil of mist seemed to have taken the place of the darkness. Even from the top of the hill where the car had come to a standstill, there was little to be seen.

"We must have come forty miles already," the chauffeur continued, "what with going out of our way all the time because of the broken bridges. I'm pretty well frozen through, and as for him," he added, jerking his thumb across his shoulder, "it seems to me you're taking a bit of a risk."

"The doctor said he would remain in exactly the same condition for twenty-four hours," Gerald declared.

"Yes, but he didn't say anything about shaking him up over forty miles of rough road," the other protested. "You'll excuse me, sir," he continued, in a slightly changed tone; "it isn't my business, of course, but I'm fairly done. It don't seem reasonable to stick at it like this. There's Holt village not a mile away, and a comfortable inn and a fire waiting. I thought that was as far as you wanted to come. We might lie up there for a few hours, at any rate."

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His passenger slipped down from his place, and, lifting the rug, peered into the tonneau of the car, over which they had tied a hood. To all appearance, the condition of the man who lay there was unchanged. There was a slightly added blueness about the lips but his breathing was still perceptible. It seemed even a little stronger. Gerald resumed his seat.

"It isn't worth while to stay at Holt," he said quietly. "We are scarcely seven miles from home now. Sit still for a few minutes and get your wind."

"Only seven miles," the chauffeur repeated more cheerfully. "That's something, anyway."

"And all downhill."

"Towards the sea, then?"

"Straight to the sea," Gerald told him. "The place we are making for is St. David's Hall, near Salthouse."

The chauffeur seemed a little startled.

"Why, that's Squire Fentolin's house!"

Gerald nodded.

"That is where we are going. You follow this road almost straight ahead."

The chauffeur slipped in the clutch.

"Oh, I know the way now, sir, right enough!" he exclaimed. "There's Salthouse marsh to cross, though. I don't know about that."

"We shall manage that all right," Gerald declared. "We've more light now, too."

They both looked around. During the last few minutes the late morning seemed to have forced its way through the clouds. They had a dim, phan-

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tasmagoric view of the stricken country: a watery plain, with here and there great patches of fields, submerged to the hedges, and houses standing out amidst the waste of waters like toy dwellings. There were whole plantations of uprooted trees. Close to the road, on their left, was a roofless house, and a family of children crying underneath a tarpaulin shelter. As they crept on, the wind came to them with a brackish flavour, salt with the sea. The chauffeur was gazing ahead doubtfully.

"I don't like the look of the marsh," he grumbled. "Can't see the road at all. However, here goes."

"Another half-hour," Gerald assured him encouragingly, "and we shall be at St. David's Hall. You can have as much rest as you like then."

They were facing the wind now, and conversation became impossible. Twice they had to pull up sharp and make a considerable detour, once on account of a fallen tree which blocked the road, and another time because of the yawning gap where a bridge had fallen away. Gerald, however, knew every inch of the country they were in and was able to give the necessary directions. They began to meet farm wagons now, full of people who had been driven from their homes. Warnings and information as to the state of the roads were shouted to them continually. Presently they came to the last steep descent, and emerged from the devastated fragment of a wood almost on to the sea level. The chauffeur clapped on his brakes and stopped short.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "Here's more trouble!"

Gerald for a moment was speechless. They seemed

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to have come suddenly upon a huge plain of waters, an immense lake reaching as far as they could see on either side. The road before them stretched like a ribbon for the next three miles. Here and there it disappeared and reappeared again. In many places it was lapped by little waves. Everywhere the hedges were either altogether or half under water. In the distance was one farmhouse, only the roof of which was visible, and from which the inhabitants were clambering into a boat. And beyond, with scarcely a break save for the rising of one strangely-shaped hill, was the sea. Gerald pointed with his finger.

"There's St. David's Hall," he said, "on the other side of the hill. The road seems all right."

"Does it!" the chauffeur grunted. "It's under water more than half the way, and Heaven knows how deep it is at the sides! I'm not going to risk my life along there. I am going to take the car back to Holt."

His hand was already upon the reverse lever, but Gerald gripped it.

"Look here," he protested, "we haven't come all this way to turn back. You don't look like a coward."

"I am not a coward, sir," was the quiet answer. "Neither am I a fool. I don't see any use in risking our lives and my master's motor-car, because you want to get home."

"Naturally," Gerald answered calmly, "but remember this. I am responsible for your car — not you. Mr. Fentolin is my uncle."

The chauffeur nodded shortly.

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"You're Mr. Gerald Fentolin, aren't you, sir?" he remarked. "I thought I recognised you."

"I am," Gerald admitted. "We've had a rough journey, but it doesn't seem sense to turn back now, does it, with the house in sight?"

"That's all very well, sir," the chauffeur objected doubtfully, "but I don't believe the road's even passable, and the floods seem to me to be rising."

"Try it," the young man begged. "Look here, I don't want to bribe you, or anything of that sort. You know you're coming out of this well. It's a serious matter for me, and I shan't be likely to forget it. I want to take this gentleman to St. David's Hall and not to a hospital. You've brought me here so far like a man. Let's go through with it. If the worst comes to the worst, we can both swim, I suppose, and we are not likely to get out of our depth."

The chauffeur moved his head backwards.

"How about him?"

"He must take his chance," Gerald replied. "He's all right where he is. The car won't upset and there are plenty of people who'll see if we get into trouble. Come, let's make a dash for it."

The chauffeur thrust in his clutch and settled himself down. They glided off along that winding stretch of road. To its very edge, on either side of them, so close that they could almost touch it, came the water, water which stretched as far as they could see, swaying, waveless, sinister-looking. Even Gerald, after his first impulse of wonder, kept his eyes averted and fixed upon the road ahead. Soon they reached a place where the water met in front. There were only the rows of white palings on either side to

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guide them. The chauffeur muttered to himself as he changed to his first speed.

"If the engine gets stopped," he said, "I don't know how we shall get out of this."

They emerged on the other side. For some time they had a clear run. Then suddenly the driver clapped on his brakes.

"My God!" he cried. "We can't get through that!"

In front of them for more than a hundred yards the water seemed suddenly to have flowed across the road. Still a mile distant, perched on a ridge of that strangely-placed hill, was their destination.

"It can't be done, sir!" the man groaned. "There isn't a car ever built could get through that. See, it's nearly up to the top of those posts. I must put her in the reverse and get back, even if we have to wait on the higher part of the road for a boat."

He glanced behind, and a second cry broke from his lips. Gerald stood up in his place. Already the road which had been clear a few minutes before was hidden. The water was washing almost over the tops of the white posts behind them. Little waves were breaking against the summit of the raised bank.

"We're cut off!" the chauffeur exclaimed. "What a fool I was to try this! There's the tide coming in as well!"

Gerald sat down in his place.

"Look here," he said, "we can't go back, whether we want to or not. It's much worse behind there than it is in front. There's only one chance. Go for it straight ahead in your first speed. It may not stop the engine. In any case, it will be worse pres-

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ently. There's no use funking it. If the worst happens, we can sit in the car. The water won't be above our heads and there are some boats about. Blow your horn well first, in case there's any one within hearing, and then go for it."

The chauffeur obeyed. They hissed and spluttered into the water. Soon all trace of the road was completely lost. They steered only by the tops of the white posts.

"It's getting deeper," the man declared. "It's within an inch or two of the bonnet now. Hold on."

A wave broke almost over them but the engine continued its beat.

"If we stop now," he gasped, "we're done!"

The engine began to knock.

"Stick at it," Gerald cried, rising in his place a little. "Look, there's only one post lower than the last one that we passed. They get higher all the time, ahead. You can almost see the road in front there. Now, in with your gear again, and stick at it."

Another wave broke, this time completely over them. They listened with strained ears — the engine continued to beat. They still moved slowly. Then there was a shock. The wheel had struck something in the road — a great stone or rock. The chauffeur thrust the car out of gear. The engine still beat. Gerald leaped from the car. The water was over his knees. He crossed in front of the bonnet and stooped down.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, tugging hard. "It's a stone."

He moved it, rolled it on one side, and pushed at the wheel of the car as his companion put in the

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first speed. They started again. He jumped back into his place.

"We've done it, all right!" he cried. "Don't you see? It's getting lower all the time."

The chauffeur had lost his nerve. His cheeks were pale, his teeth were chattering. The engine, however, was still beating. Gradually the pressure of the water grew less. In front of them they caught a glimpse of the road. They drew up at the top of a little bridge over one of the dikes. Gerald uttered a brief exclamation of triumph.

"We're safe!" he almost sobbed. "There's the road, straight ahead and round to the right. There's no more water anywhere near."

They had left the main part of the flood behind them. There were still great pools in the side of the road, and huge masses of seaweed had been carried up and were lying in their track. There was no more water, however. At every moment they drew nearer to the strangely-shaped hill with its crown of trees.

"The house is on the other side," Gerald pointed out. "We can go through the lodge gates at the back here. The ascent isn't so steep."

They turned sharply to the right, along another stretch of straight road set with white posts, ending before a red brick lodge and a closed gate. They blew the horn and a gardener came out. He gazed at them in amazement.

"It's all right," Gerald cried. "Let us through quickly, Foulds. We've a gentleman in behind who's ill."

The man swung open the gate with a respectful salute. They made their way up a winding drive

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of considerable length, and at last they came to a broad, open space almost like a platform. On their left were the marshes, and beyond, the sea. Along their right stretched the long front of an Elizabethan mansion. They drew up in front of the hall door. Their coming had been observed, and servants were already waiting. Gerald sprang to the ground.

"There's a gentleman in behind who's ill," he explained to the butler. "He has met with an accident on the way. Three or four of you had better carry him up to a bedroom — any one that is ready. And you, George," he added, turning to a boy, "get into the car and show this man the way round to the garage, and then take him to the servants' hall."

Several of the servants hastened to do his bidding, and Gerald did his best to answer the eager but respectful stream of questions. And then, just as they were in the act of lifting the still unconscious man on to the floor of the hall, came a queer sound — a shrill, reverberating whistle. They all looked up the stairs.

"The master is awake," Henderson, the butler, remarked, dropping his voice a little.

Gerald nodded.

"I will go to him at once," he said.

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# CHAPTER V

Accustomed though he was to the sight which he was about to face, Gerald shivered slightly as he opened the door of Mr. Fentolin's room. A strange sort of fear seemed to have crept into his bearing and expression, a fear of which there had been no traces whatever during those terrible hours through which he had passed — not even during that last reckless journey across the marshes. He walked with hesitating footsteps across the spacious and lofty room. He had the air of some frightened creature approaching his master. Yet all that was visible of the despot who ruled his whole household in deadly fear was the kindly and beautiful face of an elderly man, whose stunted limbs and body were mercifully concealed. He sat in a little carriage, with a rug drawn closely across his chest and up to his armpits. His beautifully shaped hands were exposed, and his face; nothing else. His hair was a silvery white; his complexion parchment-like, pallid, entirely colourless. His eyes were a soft shade of blue. His features were so finely cut and chiselled that they resembled some exquisite piece of statuary. He smiled as his nephew came slowly towards him. One might almost have fancied that the young man's abject state was a source of pleasure to him.

"So you are back again, my dear Gerald. A

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pleasant surprise, indeed, but what is the meaning of it? And what of my little commission, eh?"

The young man's face was dark and sullen. He spoke quickly but without any sign of eagerness or interest in the information he vouchsafed.

"The storm has stopped all the trains," he said. "The boat did not cross last night, and in any case I couldn't have reached Harwich. As for your commission, I travelled down from London alone with the man you told me to spy upon. I could have stolen anything he had if I had been used to the work. As it was — I brought the man himself."

Mr. Fentolin's delicate fingers played with the handle of his chair. The smile had passed from his lips. He looked at his nephew in gentle bewilderment.

"My dear boy," he protested, "come, come, be careful what you are saying. You have brought the man himself! So far as my information goes, Mr. John P. Dunster is charged with a very important diplomatic commission. He is on his way to Cologne, and from what I know about the man, I think that it would require more than your persuasions to induce him to break off his journey. You do not really wish me to believe that you have brought him here as a guest?"

"I was at Liverpool Street Station last night," Gerald declared. "I had no idea how to accost him, and as to stealing any of his belongings, I couldn't have done it. You must hear how fortune helped me, though. Mr. Dunster missed the train; so did I — purposely. He ordered a special. I asked permission to travel with him. I told him a lie as to how

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I had missed the train. I hated it, but it was necessary."

Mr. Fentolin nodded approvingly.

"My dear boy," he said, "to trifle with the truth is always unpleasant. Besides, you are a Fentolin, and our love of truth is proverbial. But there are times, you know, when for the good of others we must sacrifice our scruples. So you told Mr. Dunster a falsehood."

"He let me travel with him," Gerald continued. "We were all night getting about half-way here. Then — you know about the storm, I suppose?"

Mr. Fentolin spread out his hands.

"Could one avoid the knowledge of it?" he asked. "Such a sight has never been seen."

"We found we couldn't get to Harwich," Gerald went on. "They telegraphed to London and got permission to bring us to Yarmouth. We were on our way to Norwich, and the train ran off the line."

"An accident?" Mr. Fentolin exclaimed.

Gerald nodded.

"Our train ran off the line and pitched down an embankment. Mr. Dunster has concussion of the brain. He and I were taken to a miserable little inn near Wymondham. From there I hired a motor-car and brought him here."

"You hired a motor-car and brought him here," Mr. Fentolin repeated softly. "My dear boy — forgive me if I find this a little hard to understand. You say that you have brought him here. Had he nothing to say about it?"

"He was unconscious when we picked him up," Gerald explained. "He is unconscious now. The

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doctor said he would remain so for at least twenty-four hours, and it didn't seem to me that the journey would do him any particular harm. The roof had been stripped off the inn where we were, and the place was quite uninhabitable, so we should have had to have moved him somewhere. We put him in the tonneau of the car and covered him up. They have carried him now into a bedroom, and Sarson is looking after him."

Mr. Fentolin sat quite silent. His eyes blinked once or twice, and there was a curious curve about his lips.

"You have done well, my boy," he pronounced slowly. "Your scheme of bringing him here sounds a little primitive, but success justifies everything."

Mr. Fentolin raised to his lips and blew softly a little gold whistle which hung from a chain attached to his waistcoat. Almost immediately the door opened. A man entered, dressed somberly in black, whose bearing and demeanour alike denoted the servant, but whose physique was the physique of a prize-fighter. He was scarcely more than five feet six in height, but his shoulders were extraordinarily broad. He had a short, bull neck and long, mighty arms. His face, with the heavy jaw and small eyes, was the face of the typical fighting man, yet his features seemed to have become disposed by habit into an expression of gentle, almost servile civility.

"Meekins," Mr. Fentolin said, "a visitor has arrived. Do you happen to have noticed what luggage he brought?"

"There is one small dressing-case, sir," the man replied; "nothing else that I have seen."

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"That is all we brought," Gerald interposed.

"You will bring the dressing-case here at once," Mr. Fentolin directed, "and also my compliments to Doctor Sarson, and any pocket-book or papers which may help us to send a message to the gentleman's friends."

Meekins closed the door and departed. Mr. Fentolin turned back towards his nephew.

"My dear boy," he said, "tell me why you look as though there were ghosts flitting about the room? You are not ill, I trust?"

"Tired, perhaps," Gerald answered shortly. "We were many hours in the car. I have had no sleep."

Mr. Fentolin's face was full of kindly sympathy.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "I am selfish, indeed! I should not have kept you here for a moment. You had better go and lie down."

"I'll go directly," Gerald promised. "Can I speak to you for one moment first?"

"Speak to me?" Mr. Fentolin repeated, a little wonderingly. "My dear Gerald, is there ever a moment when I am not wholly at your service?"

"That fellow Dunster, on the platform, the first moment I spoke to him, made me feel like a cur," the boy said, with a sudden access of vigour in his tone. "I told him I was on my way to a golf tournament, and he pointed to the news about the war. Is it true, uncle, that we may be at war at any moment?"

Mr. Fentolin sighed.

"A terrible reflection, my dear boy," he admitted softly, "but, alas! the finger of probability points that way."

"Then what about me?" Gerald exclaimed. "I

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don't want to complain, but listen. You dragged me home from a public school before I could even join my cadet corps. You've kept me hanging around here with a tutor. You wouldn't let me go to the university. You've stopped my entering either of the services. I am nineteen years old and useless. Do you know what I should do to-morrow if war broke out? Enlist! It's the only thing left for me."

Mr. Fentolin was shocked.

"My dear boy!" he exclaimed. "You must not talk like that! I am quite sure that it would break your mother's heart. Enlist, indeed! Nothing of the sort. You are part of the civilian population of the country."

"Civilian population be d—d!" the boy suddenly cried, white with rage. "Uncle, forgive me, I have stood all I can bear. If you won't let me go in for the army — I could pass my exams to-morrow — I'm off. I'll enlist without waiting for the war. I can't bear this idle life any longer."

Mr. Fentolin leaned a little forward in his chair.

"Gerald!" he said softly.

The boy turned his head, turned it unwillingly. He had the air of a caged animal obeying the word of his keeper. A certain savage uncouthness seemed to have fallen upon him during the last few minutes. There was something almost like a snarl in his expression.

"Gerald!" Mr. Fentolin repeated.

Then it was obvious that there was something between those two, some memory or some living thing, seldom, if ever, to be spoken of, and yet always present. The boy began to tremble.

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"You're a little overwrought, Gerald," Mr. Fentolin declared. "Sit quietly in my easy-chair for a few moments. Wait until I have examined Mr. Dunster's belongings. Ah! Meekins has been prompt, indeed."

There was a stealthy tap at the door. Meekins entered with the small dressing-case in his hand. He brought it over to his master's chair. Mr. Fentolin pointed to the floor.

"Open it there, Meekins," he directed. "I fancy that the pocket-book you are carrying will prove more interesting. We will just glance through the dressing-case first. Thank you. Yes, you can lay the things upon the floor. A man of Spartan-like life, I should imagine Mr. Dunster. A spare toothbrush, though, I am glad to see. Pyjamas of most unattractive pattern. And what a taste in shirts! Nothing but wearing apparel and singularly little of that, I fancy."

The dressing-case was empty, its contents upon the floor. Mr. Fentolin held out his hand and took the pocket-book which Meekins had been carrying. It was an ordinary morocco affair, similar to those issued by American banking houses to enclose letters of credit. One side of it was filled with notes. Mr. Fentolin withdrew them and glanced them through.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "No wonder our friend engages special trains! He travels like a prince, indeed. Two thousand pounds, or near it, in this little compartment. And here, I see, a letter, a sealed letter with no address."

He held it out in front of him. It was a long commercial envelope of ordinary type, and although

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the flap was secured with a blob of sealing wax, there was no particular impression upon it.

"We can match this envelope, I think," Mr. Fentolin said softly. "The seal we can copy. I think that, for the sake of others, we must discover the cause for this hurried journey on the part of Mr. John P. Dunster."

With his long, delicate forefinger Mr. Fentolin slit the envelope and withdrew the single sheet of paper which it contained. There were a dozen lines of written matter, and what appeared to be a dozen signatures appended. Mr. Fentolin read it, at first with ordinary interest. Then a change came. The look of a man drawn out of himself, drawn out of all knowledge of his surroundings or his present state, stole into his face. Literally he became transfixed. The delicate fingers of his left hand gripped the sides of his little carriage. His eyes shone as though those few written lines upon which they were riveted were indeed some message from an unknown, an unimagined world. Yet no word ever passed his lips. There came a time when the tension seemed a little relaxed. With fingers which still trembled, he folded up the sheet and replaced it in the envelope. He guarded it with both his hands and sat quite still. Neither Gerald nor his servant moved. Somehow, the sense of Mr. Fentolin's suppressed excitement seemed to have become communicated to them. It was a little tableau, broken at last by Mr. Fentolin himself.

"I should like," he said, turning to Gerald, "to be alone. It may interest you to know that this document which Mr. Dunster has brought across the seas,

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and which I hold in my hands, is the most amazing message of modern times."

Gerald rose to his feet.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked abruptly. "Do you want any one in from the telegraph room?"

Mr. Fentolin shook his head slowly.

"At present," he announced, "I am going to reflect. Meekins, my chair to the north window — so. I am going to sit here," he went on, "and I am going to look across the sea and reflect. A very fortunate storm, after all, I think, which kept Mr. John P. Dunster from the Harwich boat last night! Leave me, Gerald, for a time. Stand behind my chair, Meekins, and see that no one enters."

Mr. Fentolin sat in his chair, his hands still gripping the wonderful document, his eyes travelling over the ocean now flecked with sunlight. His eyes were fixed upon the horizon. He looked steadily eastward.

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# CHAPTER VI

Mr. John P. Dunster opened his eyes upon strange surroundings. He found himself lying upon a bed deliciously soft, with lace-edged sheets and lavender-perfumed bed hangings. Through the discreetly opened upper window came a pleasant and ozone-laden breeze. The furniture in the room was mostly of an old-fashioned type, some of it of oak, curiously carved, and most of it surmounted with a coat of arms. The apartment was lofty and of almost palatial proportions. The whole atmosphere of the place breathed comfort and refinement. The only thing of which he did not wholly approve was the face of the nurse who rose silently to her feet at his murmured question:

"Where am I?"

She felt his forehead, altered a bandage for a moment, and took his wrist between her fingers.

"You have been ill," she said. "There was a railway accident. You are to lie quite still and not say a word. I am going to fetch the doctor now. He wished to see you directly you spoke."

Mr. Dunster dozed again for several moments. When he reopened his eyes, a man was standing by his bedside, a short man with a black beard and gold-rimmed glasses. Mr. Dunster, in this first stage of his convalescence, was perhaps difficult to please, for he did not like the look of the doctor, either.

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"Please tell me where I am?" he begged.

"You have been in a railway accident," the doctor told him, "and you were brought here afterwards."

"In a railway accident," Mr. Dunster repeated. "Ah, yes, I remember! I took a special to Harwich — I remember now. Where is my dressing-bag?"

"It is here by the side of your bed."

"And my pocket-book?"

"It is on your dressing-table."

"Have any of my things been looked at?"

"Only so far as was necessary to discover your identity," the doctor assured him. "Don't talk too much. The nurse is bringing you some beef tea."

"When," Mr. Dunster enquired, "shall I be able to continue my journey?"

"That depends upon many things," the doctor replied.

Mr. Dunster drank his beef tea and felt considerably stronger. His head still ached, but his memory was returning.

"There was a young man in the carriage with me," he asked presently. "Mr. Gerald something or other I think he said his name was?"

"Fentolin," the doctor said. "He is unhurt. This is his relative's house to which you have been brought."

Mr. Dunster lay for a time with knitted brows. Once more the name of Fentolin seemed somehow familiar to him, seemed somehow to bring with it to his memory a note of warning. He looked around the room fretfully. He looked into the nurse's face, which he disliked exceedingly, and he looked at the doctor, whom he was beginning to detest.

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"Whose house exactly is this?" he demanded.

"This is St. David's Hall — the home of Mr. Miles Fentolin," the doctor told him. "The young gentleman with whom you were travelling is his nephew."

"Can I send a telegram?" Mr. Dunster asked, a little abruptly.

"Without a doubt," the doctor replied. "Mr. Fentolin desired me to ask you if there was any one whom you would like to apprise of your safety."

Again the man upon the bed lay quite still, with knitted brows. There was surely something familiar about that name. Was it his fevered fancy or was there also something a little sinister?

The nurse, who had glided from the room, came back presently with some telegraph forms. Mr. Dunster held out his hand for them and then hesitated.

"Can you tell me any date, Doctor, upon which I can rely upon leaving here?"

"You will probably be well enough to travel on the third day from now," the doctor assured him.

"The third day," Mr. Dunster muttered. "Very well."

He wrote out three telegrams and passed them over.

"One," he said, "is to New York, one to The Hague, and one to London. There was plenty of money in my pocket. Perhaps you will find it and pay for these."

"Is there anything more," the doctor asked, "that can be done for your comfort?"

"Nothing at present," Mr. Dunster replied. "My head aches now, but I think that I shall want

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to leave before three days are up. Are you the doctor in the neighbourhood?"

Sarson shook his head.

"I am physician to Mr. Fentolin's household," he answered quietly. "I live here. Mr. Fentolin is himself somewhat of an invalid and requires constant medical attention."

Mr. Dunster contemplated the speaker steadfastly.

"You will forgive me," he said. "I am an American and I am used to plain speech. I am quite unused to being attended by strange doctors. I understand that you are not in general practice now. Might I ask if you are fully qualified?"

"I am an M.D. of London," the doctor replied. "You can make yourself quite easy as to my qualifications. It would not suit Mr. Fentolin's purpose to entrust himself to the care of any one without a reputation."

He left the room, and Mr. Dunster closed his eyes. His slumbers, however, were not altogether peaceful ones. All the time there seemed to be a hammering inside his head, and from somewhere back in his obscured memory the name of Fentolin seemed to be continually asserting itself. From somewhere or other, the amazing sense which sometimes gives warning of danger to men of adventure, seemed to have opened its feelers. He rested because he was exhausted, but even in his sleep he was ill at ease.

The doctor, with the telegrams in his hand, made his way down a splendid staircase, past the long picture gallery where masterpieces of Van Dyck and Rubens frowned and leered down upon him; descended the final stretch of broad oak stairs, crossed the hall,

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and entered his master's rooms. Mr. Fentolin was sitting before the open window, an easel in front of him, a palette in his left hand, painting with deft, swift touches.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, without looking around, "it is my friend the doctor, my friend Sarson, M.D. of London, L.R.C.P. and all the rest of it. He brings with him the odour of the sick room. For a moment or two, just for a moment, dear friend, do not disturb me. Do not bring any alien thoughts into my brain. I am absorbed, you see — absorbed. It is a strange problem of colour, this."

He was silent for several moments, glancing repeatedly out of the window and back to his canvas, painting all the time with swift and delicate precision.

"Meekins, who stands behind my chair," Mr. Fentolin continued, "even Meekins is entranced. He has a soul, my friend Sarson, although you might not think it. He, too, sees sometimes the colour in the skies, the glitter upon the sands, the clear, sweet purity of those long stretches of virgin water. Meekins, I believe, has a soul, only he likes better to see these things grow under his master's touch than to wander about and solve their riddles for himself."

The man remained perfectly immovable. Not a feature twitched. Yet it was a fact that, although he stood where Mr. Fentolin could not possibly observe him, he never removed his gaze from the canvas.

"You see, my medical friend, that there has been a great tide in the night, following upon the flood? Even our small landmarks are shifted. Soon, in my little carriage, I shall ride down to the Tower. I shall sit there, and I shall watch the sea. I think that this

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evening, with the turn of the tide, the spray may reach even to my windows there. I shall paint again. There is always something fresh in the sea, you know — always something fresh in the sea. Like a human face — angry or pleased, sullen or joyful. Some people like to paint the sea at its calmest and most beautiful. Some people like to see happy faces around them. It is not every one who appreciates the other things. It is not quite like that with me, eh, Sarson?"

His hand fell to his side. Momentarily he had finished his work. He turned around and eyed the doctor, who stood in taciturn silence.

"Answer. Answer me," he insisted.

The doctor's gloomy face seemed darker still.

"You have spoken the truth, Mr. Fentolin," he admitted. "You are not one of the vulgar herd who love to consort with pleasure and happiness. You are one of those who understand the beauty of unhappiness — in others," he added, with faint emphasis.

Mr. Fentolin smiled. His face became almost like the face of one of those angels of the great Italian master.

"How well you know me!" he murmured. "My humble effort, Doctor — how do you like it?"

The doctor bent over the canvas.

"I know nothing about art," he said, a little roughly. "Your work seems to me clever — a little grotesque, perhaps; a little straining after the hard, plain things which threaten. Nothing of the idealist in your work, Mr. Fentolin."

Mr. Fentolin studied the canvas himself for a moment.

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"A clever man, Sarson," he remarked coolly, "but no courtier. Never mind, my work pleases me. It gives me a passing sensation of happiness. Now, what about our patient?"

"He recovers," the doctor pronounced. "From my short examination, I should say that he had the constitution of an ox. I have told him that he will be up in three days." As a matter of fact, he will be able, if he wants to, to walk out of the house to-morrow."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head.

"We cannot spare him quite so soon," he declared. "We must avail ourselves of this wonderful chance afforded us by my brilliant young nephew. We must keep him with us for a little time. What is it that you have in your hands, Doctor? Telegrams, I think. Let me look at them."

The doctor held them out. Mr. Fentolin took them eagerly between his thin, delicate fingers. Suddenly his face darkened, and became like the face of a spoilt and angry child.

"Cipher!" he exclaimed furiously. "A cipher which he knows so well as to remember it, too! Never mind, it will be easy to decode. It will amuse me during the afternoon. Very good, Sarson. I will take charge of these."

"You do not wish anything dispatched?"

"Nothing at present," Mr. Fentolin sighed. "It will be well, I think, for the poor man to remain undisturbed by any communications from his friends. Is he restless at all?"

"He wants to get on with his journey."

"We shall see," Mr. Fentolin remarked. "Now feel my pulse, Sarson. How am I this morning?"

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The doctor held the thin wrist for a moment between his fingers, and let it go.

"In perfect health, as usual," he announced grimly.

"Ah, but you cannot be sure!" Mr. Fentolin protested. "My tongue, if you please."

He put it out.

"Excellent!"

"We must make quite certain," Mr. Fentolin continued. "There are so many people who would miss me. My place in the world would not be easily filled. Undo my waistcoat, Sarson. Feel my heart, please. Feel carefully. I can see the end of your stethoscope in your pocket. Don't scamp it. I fancied this morning, when I was lying here alone, that there was something almost like a palpitation — a quicker beat. Be very careful, Sarson. Now."

The doctor made his examination with impassive face. Then he stepped back.

"There is no change in your condition, Mr. Fentolin," he announced. "The palpitation you spoke of is a mistake. You are in perfect health."

Mr. Fentolin sighed gently.

"Then," he said, "I will now amuse myself by a gentle ride down to the Tower. You are entirely satisfied, Sarson? You are keeping nothing back from me?"

The doctor looked at him with grim, impassive face.

"There is nothing to keep back," he declared. "You have the constitution of a cowboy. There is no reason why you should not live for another thirty years."

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Mr. Fentolin sighed, as though a weight had been removed from his heart.

"I will now," he decided, reaching forward for the handle of his carriage, "go down to the Tower. It is just possible that a few days' seclusion might be good for our guest."

The doctor turned silently away. There was no one there to see his expression as he walked towards the door.

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# CHAPTER VII

The two men who were supping together in the grillroom at the Café Milan were talking with a seriousness which seemed a little out of keeping with the rose-shaded lamps and the swaying music of the band from the distant restaurant. Their conversation had started some hours before in the club smoking-room and had continued intermittently throughout the evening. It had received a further stimulus when Richard Hamel, who had bought an *Evening Standard* on their way from the theatre a few minutes ago, came across a certain paragraph in it which he read aloud.

"Hanged if I understand things over here, nowadays, Reggie!" he declared, laying the paper down. "Here's another Englishman imprisoned in Germany — this time at a place no one ever heard of before. I won't try to pronounce it. What does it all mean? It's all very well to shrug your shoulders, but when there are eighteen arrests within one week on a charge of espionage, there must be something up."

For the first time Reginald Kinsley seemed inclined to discuss the subject seriously. He drew the paper towards him and read the little paragraph, word by word. Then he gave some further order to an attentive *maître d'hôtel* and glanced around to be sure that they were not overheard.

"Look here, Dick, old chap," he said, "you are just back from abroad and you are not quite in the hang

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of things yet. Let me ask you a plain question. What do you think of us all?"

"Think of you?" Hamel repeated, a little doubtfully. "Do you mean personally?"

"Take it any way you like," Kinsley replied. "Look at me. Nine years ago we played cricket in the same eleven. I don't look much like cricket now, do I?"

Hamel looked at his companion thoughtfully. For a man who was doubtless still young, Kinsley had certainly an aged appearance. The hair about his temples was grey; there were lines about his mouth and forehead. He had the air of one who lived in an atmosphere of anxiety.

"To me," Hamel declared frankly, "you look worried. If I hadn't heard so much of the success of your political career and all the rest of it, I should have thought that things were going badly with you."

"They've gone well enough with me personally," Kinsley admitted, "but I'm only one of many. Politics isn't the game it was. The Foreign Office especially is ageing its men fast these few years. We've been going through hell, Hamel, and we are up against it now, hard up against it."

The slight smile passed from the lips of Hamel's sunburnt, good-natured face. He himself seemed to become infected with something of his companion's anxiety.

"There's nothing seriously wrong, is there, Reggie?" he asked.

"Dick," said Kinsley, with a sigh, "I am afraid there is. It's very seldom I talk as plainly as this to any one, but you are just the person one can un-

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burden oneself to a little; and to tell you the truth, it's rather a relief. As you say, these eighteen arrests in one week do mean something. Half of the Englishmen who have been arrested are, to my certain knowledge, connected with our Secret Service, and they have been arrested, in many cases, where there are no fortifications worth speaking of within fifty miles, on one pretext or another. The fact of the matter is that things are going on in Germany, just at the present moment, the knowledge of which is of vital interest to us."

"Then these arrests," Hamel remarked, "are really bona fide?"

"Without a doubt," his companion agreed. "I only wonder there have not been more. I am telling you what is a pretty open secret when I tell you that there is a conference due to be held this week at some place or another on the continent — I don't know where, myself — which will have a very important bearing upon our future. We know just as much as that and not much more."

"A conference between whom?" Hamel asked.

Kinsley dropped his voice almost to a whisper.

"We know," he replied, "that a very great man from Russia, a greater still from France, a minister from Austria, a statesman from Italy, and an envoy from Japan, have been invited to meet a German minister whose name I will not mention, even to you. The subject of their proposed discussion has never been breathed. One can only suspect. When I tell you that no one from this country was invited to the conference, I think you will be able, broadly speaking, to divine its purpose. The clouds have been gathering

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for a good many years, and we have only buried our heads a little deeper in the sands. We have had our chances and wilfully chucked them away. National Service or three more army corps four years ago would have brought us an alliance which would have meant absolute safety for twenty-one years. You know what happened. We have lived through many rumours and escaped, more narrowly than most people realise, a great many dangers, but there is every indication this time that the end is really coming."

"And what will the end be?" Hamel enquired eagerly.

Kinsley shrugged his shoulders and paused while their glasses were filled with wine.

"It will be in the nature of a diplomatic coup," he said presently. "Of that much I feel sure. England will be forced into such a position that she will have no alternative left but to declare war. That, of course, will be the end of us. With our ridiculously small army and absolutely no sane scheme for home defence, we shall lose all that we have worth fighting for — our colonies — without being able to strike a blow. The thing is so ridiculously obvious. It has been admitted time after time by every sea lord and every commander-in-chief. We have listened to it, and that's all. Our fleet is needed under present conditions to protect our own shores. There isn't a single battleship which could be safely spared. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, India, must take care of themselves. I wonder when a nation of the world ever played fast and loose with great possessions as we have done!"

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"This is a nice sort of thing to hear almost one's first night in England," Hamel remarked a little gloomily. "Tell me some more about this conference. Are you sure that your information is reliable?"

"Our information is miserably scanty," Kinsley admitted. "Curiously enough, the man who must know most about the whole thing is an Englishman, one of the most curious mortals in the British Empire. A spy of his succeeded in learning more than any of our people, and without being arrested, too."

"And who is this singular person?" Hamel asked.

"A man of whom you, I suppose, never heard," Kinsley replied. "His name is Fentolin — Miles Fentolin — and he lives somewhere down in Norfolk. He is one of the strangest characters that ever lived, stranger than any effort of fiction I ever met with. He was in the Foreign Office once, and every one was predicting for him a brilliant career. Then there was an accident — let me see, it must have been some six or seven years ago — and he had to have both his legs amputated. No one knows exactly how the accident happened, and there was always a certain amount of mystery connected with it. Since then he has buried himself in the country. I don't think, in fact, that he ever moves outside his place; but somehow or other he has managed to keep in touch with all the political movements of the day."

"Fentolin," Hamel repeated softly to himself. "Tell me, whereabouts does he live?"

"Quite a wonderful place in Norfolk, I believe, somewhere near the sea. I've forgotten the name, for the moment. He has had wireless telegraphy in-

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stalled; he has a telegraph office in the house, half-a-dozen private wires, and they say that he spends an immense amount of money keeping in touch with foreign politics. His excuse is that he speculates largely, as I dare say he does; but just lately," Kinsley went on more slowly, "he has been an object of anxiety to all of us. It was he who sent the first agent out to Germany, to try and discover at least where this conference was to be held. His man returned in safety, and he has one over there now who has not been arrested. We seem to have lost nearly all of ours."

"Do you mean to say that this man Fentolin actually possesses information which the Government hasn't as to the intentions of foreign Powers?" Hamel asked.

Kinsley nodded. There was a slight flush upon his pallid cheeks.

"He not only has it, but he doesn't mean to part with it. A few hundred years ago, when the rulers of this country were men with blood in their veins, he'd have been given just one chance to tell all he knew, and hung as a traitor if he hesitated. We don't do that sort of thing nowadays. We rather go in for preserving traitors. We permit them even in our own House of Commons. However, I don't want to depress you and play the alarmist so soon after your return to London. I dare say the old country'll muddle along through our time."

"Don't be foolish," Hamel begged. "There's no other subject of conversation could interest me half as much. Have you formed any idea yourself as to the nature of this conference?"

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"We all have an idea," Kinsley replied grimly; "India for Russia; a large slice of China for Japan, with probably Australia thrown in; Alsace-Lorraine for France's neutrality. There's bribery for you. What's to become of poor England then? Our friends are only human, after all, and it's merely a question of handing over to them sufficient spoil. They must consider themselves first: that's the first duty of their politicians towards their country."

"You mean to say," Hamel asked, "that you seriously believe that a conference is on the point of being held at which France and Russia are to be invited to consider suggestions like this?"

"I am afraid there's no doubt about it," Kinsley declared. "Their ambassadors in London profess to know nothing. That, of course, is their reasonable attitude, but there's no doubt whatever that the conference has been planned. I should say that to-night we are nearer war, if we can summon enough spirit to fight, than we have been since Fashoda."

"Queer if I have returned just in time for the scrap," Hamel remarked thoughtfully. "I was in the Militia once, so I expect I can get a job, if there's any fighting."

"I can get you a better job than fighting — one you can start on to-morrow, too," Kinsley announced abruptly, "that is if you really want to help?"

"Of course I do," Hamel insisted. "I'm on for anything."

"You say that you are entirely your own master for the next six months?"

"Or as much longer as I like," Hamel assented. "No plans at all, except that I might drift round to

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the Norfolk coast and look up some of the places where the governor used to paint. There's a queer little house — St. David's Tower, I believe they call it — which really belongs to me. It was given to my father, or rather he bought it, from a man who I think must have been some relative of your friend. I feel sure the name was Fentolin."

Reginald Kinsley set down his wine-glass.

"Is your St. David's Tower anywhere near a place called Salthouse?" he asked reflectively.

"That's the name of the village," Hamel admitted. "My father used to spend quite a lot of time in those parts, and painted at least a dozen pictures down there."

"This is a coincidence," Reginald Kinsley declared, lighting a cigarette. "I think, if I were you, Dick, I'd go down and claim my property."

"Tired of me already?" Hamel asked, smiling.

Reginald Kinsley knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"It isn't that. The fact is, that job I was speaking to you about was simply this. We want some one to go down to Salthouse — not exactly as a spy, you know, but some one who has his wits about him. We are all of us very curious about this man Fentolin. There are no end of rumours which I won't mention to you, for they might only put you off the scent. But the man seems to be always intriguing. It wouldn't matter so much if he were our friend, or if he were simply a financier, but to tell you the truth, we have cause to suspect him."

"But he's an Englishman, surely?" Hamel asked. "The Fentolin who was my father's friend was just a

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very wealthy Norfolk squire — one of the best, from all I have heard."

"Miles Fentolin is an Englishman," Kinsley admitted. "It is true, too, that he comes of a very ancient Norfolk family. It doesn't do, however, to build too much upon that. From all I can learn of him, he is a sort of Puck, a professional mischief-maker. I don't suppose there's anything an outsider could find out which would be really useful to us, but all the same, if I had the time, I should certainly go down to Norfolk myself."

The conversation drifted away for a while. Mutual acquaintances entered, there were several introductions, and it was not until the two found themselves together in Kinsley's rooms for a few minutes before parting that they were alone again. Hamel returned then once more to the subject.

"Reggie," he said, "if you think it would be of the slightest use, I'll go down to Salthouse to-morrow. I am rather keen on going there, anyway. I am absolutely fed up with life here already."

"It's just what I want you to do," Kinsley said. "I am afraid Fentolin is a little too clever for you to get on the right side of him, but if you could only get an idea as to what his game is down there, it would be a great help. You see, the fellow can't have gone into all this sort of thing blindfold. We've lost several very useful agents abroad and two from New York who've gone into his pay. There must be a method in it somewhere. If it really ends with his financial operations — why, all right. That's very likely what it'll come to, but we should like to know. The merest hint would be useful."

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"I'll do my best," Hamel promised. "In any case, it will be just the few days' holiday I was looking forward to."

Kinsley helped himself to whisky and soda and turned towards his friend.

"Here's luck to you, Dick! Take care of yourself. All sorts of things may happen, you know. Old man Fentolin may take a fancy to you and tell you secrets that any statesman in Europe would be glad to hear. He may tell you why this conference is being held and what the result will be. You may be the first to hear of our coming fall. Well, here's to you, anyway! Drop me a line, if you've anything to report."

"Cheero!" Hamel answered, as he set down his empty tumbler. "Astonishing how keen I feel about this little adventure. I'm perfectly sick of the humdrum life I have been leading the last week, and you do sort of take one back to the Arabian Nights, you know, Reggie. I am never quite sure whether to take you seriously or not."

Kinsley smiled as he held his friend's hand for a moment.

"Dick," he said earnestly, "if only you'd believe it, the adventures in the Arabian Nights were as nothing compared with the present-day drama of foreign politics. You see, we've learned to conceal things nowadays — to smooth them over, to play the part of ordinary citizens to the world while we tug at the underhand levers in our secret moments. Good night! Good luck!"

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# CHAPTER VIII

Richard Hamel, although he certainly had not the appearance of a person afflicted with nerves, gave a slight start. For the last half-hour, during which time the train had made no stop, he had been alone in his compartment. Yet, to his surprise, he was suddenly aware that the seat opposite to him had been noiselessly taken by a girl whose eyes, also, were fixed with curious intentness upon the broad expanse of marshland and sands across which the train was slowly making its way. Hamel had spent a great many years abroad, and his first impulse was to speak with the unexpected stranger. He forgot for a moment that he was in England, travelling in a first-class carriage, and pointed with his left hand towards the sea.

"Queer country this, isn't it?" he remarked pleasantly. "Do you know, I never heard you come in. It gave me quite a start when I found that I had a fellow-passenger."

She looked at him with a certain amount of still surprise, a look which he returned just as steadfastly, because even in those few seconds he was conscious of that strange selective interest, certainly unaccounted for by his own impressions of her appearance. She seemed to him, at that first glance, very far indeed from being good-looking, according to any of the standards by which he had measured good looks. She

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was thin, too thin for his taste, and she carried herself with an aloofness to which he was unaccustomed. Her cheeks were quite pale, her hair of a soft shade of brown, her eyes grey and sad. She gave him altogether an impression of colourlessness, and he had been living in a land where colour and vitality meant much. Her speech, too, in its very restraint, fell strangely upon his ears.

"I have been travelling in an uncomfortable compartment," she observed. "I happened to notice, when passing along the corridor, that yours was empty. In any case, I am getting out at the next station."

"So am I," he replied, still cheerfully. "I suppose the next station is St. David's?"

She made no answer, but so far as her expression counted for anything at all, she was a little surprised. Her eyes considered him for a moment. Hamel was tall, well over six feet, powerfully made, with good features, clear eyes, and complexion unusually sunburnt. He wore a flannel collar of unfamiliar shape, and his clothes, although they were neat enough, were of a pattern and cut obviously designed to afford the maximum of ease and comfort with the minimum regard to appearance. He wore, too, very thick boots, and his hands gave one the impression that they were seldom gloved. His voice was pleasant, and he had the easy self-confidence of a person sure of himself in the world. She put him down as a colonial — perhaps an American — but his rank in life mystified her.

"This seems the queerest stretch of country," he went on; "long spits of sand jutting right out into the sea, dikes and creeks — miles and miles of them.

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Now, I wonder, is it low tide or high? Low, I should think, because of the sea-shine on the sand there."

She glanced out of the window.

"The tide," she told him, "is almost at its lowest."

"You live in this neighbourhood, perhaps?" he enquired.

"I do," she assented.

"Sort of country one might get very fond of," he ventured.

She glanced at him from the depths of her grey eyes.

"Do you think so?" she rejoined coldly. "For my part, I hate it."

He was surprised at the unexpected emphasis of her tone — the first time, indeed, that she had shown any signs of interest in the conversation.

"Kind of dull I suppose you find it," he remarked pensively, looking out across the waste of lavender-grown marshes, sand hummocks piled with seaweed, and a far distant line of pebbled shore. "And yet, I don't know. I have lived by the sea a good deal, and however monotonous it may seem at first, there's always plenty of change, really. Tide and wind do such wonderful work."

She, too, was looking out now towards the sea.

"Oh, it isn't exactly that," she said quietly. "I am quite willing to admit what all the tourists and chance visitors call the fascination of these places. I happen to dislike them, that is all. Perhaps it is because I live here, because I see them day by day; perhaps because the sight of them and the thought of them have become woven into my life."

She was talking half to herself. For a moment,

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even the knowledge of his presence had escaped her. Hamel, however, did not realise that fact. He welcomed her confidence as a sign of relaxation from the frigidity of her earlier demeanour.

"That seems hard," he observed sympathetically. "It seems odd to hear you talk like that, too. Your life, surely, ought to be pleasant enough."

She looked away from the sea into his face. Although the genuine interest which she saw there and the kindly expression of his eyes disarmed annoyance, she still stiffened slightly.

"Why ought it?"

The question was a little bewildering.

"Why, because you are young and a girl," he replied. "It's natural to be cheerful, isn't it?"

"Is it?" she answered listlessly. "I cannot tell. I have not had much experience."

"How old are you?" he asked bluntly.

This time it certainly seemed as though her reply would contain some rebuke for his curiosity. She glanced once more into his face, however, and the instinctive desire to administer that well-deserved snub passed away. He was so obviously interested, his question was asked so naturally, that its spice of impertinence was as though it had not existed.

"I am twenty-one," she told him.

"And how long have you lived here?"

"Since I left boarding-school, four years ago."

"Anywhere near where I am going to bury myself for a time, I wonder?" he went on.

"That depends," she replied. "Our only neighbours are the Lorneybrookes of Market Burnham. Are you going there?"

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He shook his head.

"I've got a little shanty of my own," he explained, "quite close to St. David's Station. I've never even seen it yet."

She vouchsafed some slight show of curiosity.

"Where is this shanty, as you call it?" she asked him.

"I really haven't the faintest idea," he replied. "I am looking for it now. All I can tell you is that it stands just out of reach of the full tides, on a piece of rock, dead on the beach and about a mile from the station. It was built originally for a coastguard station and meant to hold a lifeboat, but they found they could never launch the lifeboat when they had it, so the man to whom all the foreshore and most of the land around here belongs — a Mr. Fentolin, I believe — sold it to my father. I expect the place has tumbled to pieces by this time, but I thought I'd have a look at it."

She was gazing at him steadfastly now, with parted lips.

"What is your name?" she demanded.

"Richard Hamel."

"Hamel."

She repeated it lingeringly. It seemed quite unfamiliar.

"Was your father a great friend of Mr. Fentolin's, then?" she asked.

"I believe so, in a sort of way," he answered. "My father was Hamel the artist, you know. They made him an R.A. some time before he died. He used to come out here and live in a tent. Then Mr. Fentolin let him use this place and finally sold it to him.

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My father used often to speak to me about it before he died."

"Tell me," she enquired, "I do not know much about these matters, but have you any papers to prove that it was sold to your father and that you have the right to occupy it now when you choose?"

He smiled.

"Of course I have," he assured her. "As a matter of fact, as none of us have been here for so long, I thought I'd better bring the title-deed, or whatever they call it, along with me. It's with the rest of my traps at Norwich. Oh, the place belongs to me, right enough!" he went on, smiling. "Don't tell me that any one's pulled it down, or that it's disappeared from the face of the earth?"

"No," she said, "it still remains there. When we are round the next curve, I think I can show it to you. But every one has forgotten, I think, that it doesn't belong to Mr. Fentolin still. He uses it himself very often."

"What for?"

She looked at her questioner quite steadfastly, quite quietly, speechlessly. A curious uneasiness crept into his thoughts. There were mysterious things in her face. He knew from that moment that she, too, directly or indirectly, was concerned with those strange happenings at which Kinsley had hinted. He knew that there were things which she was keeping from him now.

"Mr. Fentolin uses one of the rooms as a studio. He likes to paint there and be near the sea," she explained. "But for the rest, I do not know. I never go near the place."

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"I am afraid," he remarked, after a few moments of silence, "that I shall be a little unpopular with Mr. Fentolin. Perhaps I ought to have written first, but then, of course, I had no idea that any one was making use of the place."

"I do not understand," she said, "how you can possibly expect to come down like this and live there, without any preparation."

"Why not?"

"You haven't any servants nor any furniture nor things to cook with."

He laughed.

"Oh! I am an old campaigner," he assured her. "I meant to pick up a few oddments in the village. I don't suppose I shall stay very long, anyhow, but I thought I'd like to have a look at the place. By-the-by, what sort of a man is Mr. Fentolin?"

Again there was that curious expression in her eyes, an expression almost of secret terror, this time not wholly concealed. He could have sworn that her hands were cold.

"He met with an accident many years ago," she said slowly. "Both his legs were amputated. He spends his life in a little carriage which he wheels about himself."

"Poor fellow!" Hamel exclaimed, with a strong man's ready sympathy for suffering. "That is just as much as I have heard about him. Is he a decent sort of fellow in other ways? I suppose, anyhow, if he has really taken a fancy to my little shanty, I shall have to give it up."

Then, as it seemed to him, for the first time real life leaped into her face. She leaned towards him. Her

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tone was half commanding, half imploring, her manner entirely confidential.

"Don't!" she begged. "It is yours. Claim it. Live in it. Do anything you like with it, but take it away from Mr. Fentolin!"

Hamel was speechless. He sat a little forward, a hand on either knee, his mouth ungracefully open, an expression of blank and utter bewilderment in his face. For the first time he began to have vague doubts concerning this young lady. Everything about her had been so strange: her quiet entrance into the carriage, her unusual manner of talking, and finally this last passionate, inexplicable appeal.

"I am afraid," he said at last, "I don't quite understand. You say the poor fellow has taken a fancy to the place and likes being there. Well, it isn't much of a catch for me, anyway. I'm rather a wanderer, and I dare say I shan't be back in these parts again for years. Why shouldn't I let him have it if he wants it? It's no loss to me. I'm not a painter, you know, like my father."

She seemed on the point of making a further appeal. Her lips, even, were parted, her head a little thrown back. And then she stopped. She said nothing. The silence lasted so long that he became almost embarrassed.

"You will forgive me if I am a little dense, won't you?" he begged. "To tell you the truth," he went on, smiling, "I've got a sort of feeling that I'd like to do anything you ask me. Now won't you just explain a little more clearly what you mean, and I'll blow up the old place sky high, if it's any pleasure to you."

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She seemed suddenly to have reverted to her former self — the cold and colourless young woman who had first taken the seat opposite to his.

"Mine was a very foolish request," she admitted quietly. "I am sorry that I ever made it. It was just an impulse, because the little building we were speaking of has been connected with one or two very disagreeable episodes. Nevertheless, it was foolish of me. How long did you think of staying there — that is," she added, with a faint smile, "providing that you find it possible to prove your claim and take up possession?"

"Oh, just for a week or so," he answered lightly, "and as to regaining possession of it," he went on, a slightly pugnacious instinct stirring him, "I don't imagine that there'll be any difficulty about that."

"Really!" she murmured.

"Not that I want to make myself disagreeable," he continued, "but the Tower is mine, right enough, even if I have let it remain unoccupied for some time."

She let down the window — a task in which he hastened to assist her. A rush of salt, cold air swept into the compartment. He sniffed it eagerly.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed.

She stretched out a long arm and pointed. Away in the distance, on the summit of a line of pebbled shore, standing, as it seemed, sheer over the sea, was a little black speck.

"That," she said, "is the Tower."

He changed his position and leaned out of the window.

"Well, it's a queer little place," he remarked. "It doesn't look worth quarrelling over, does it?"

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"And that," she went on, directing his attention to the hill, "is Mr. Fentolin's home, St. David's Hall."

For several moments he made no remark at all. There was something curiously impressive in that sudden sweep up from the sea-line; the strange, miniature mountain standing in the middle of the marshes, with its tree-crowned background; and the long, weather-beaten front of the house turned bravely to the sea.

"I never saw anything like it," he declared. "Why, it's barely a quarter of a mile from the sea, isn't it?"

"A little more than that. It is a strangely situated abode, isn't it?"

"Wonderful!" he agreed, with emphasis. "I must study the geological formation of that hill," he continued, with interest. "Why, it looks almost like an island now."

"That is because of the floods," she told him. "Even at high tide the creeks never reach so far as the back there. All the water you see stretching away inland is flood water — the result of the storm, I suppose. This is where you get out," she concluded, rising to her feet.

She turned away with the slightest nod. A maid was already awaiting her at the door of the compartment. Hamel was suddenly conscious of the fact that he disliked her going immensely.

"We shall, perhaps, meet again during the next few days," he remarked.

She half turned her head. Her expression was scarcely encouraging.

"I hope," she said, "that you will not be disappointed in your quarters."

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Hamel followed her slowly on to the platform, saw her escorted to a very handsome motor-car by an obsequious station-master, and watched the former disappear down the stretch of straight road which led to the hill. Then, with a stick in one hand, and the hand-bag which was his sole luggage in the other, he left the station and turned seaward.

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# CHAPTER IX

Mr. Fentolin, surrounded by his satellites, was seated in his chair before the writing-table. There were present in the room most of the people important to him in his somewhat singular life. A few feet away, in characteristic attitude, stood Meekins. Doctor Sarson, with his hands behind him, was looking out of the window. At the further end of the table stood a confidential telegraph clerk, who was just departing with a little sheaf of messages. By his side, with a notebook in her hand, stood Mr. Fentolin's private secretary — a white-haired woman, with a strangely transparent skin and light brown eyes, dressed in somber black, a woman who might have been of any age from thirty to fifty. Behind her was a middle-aged man whose position in the household no one was quite sure about — a clean-shaven man whose name was Ryan, and who might very well have been once an actor or a clergyman. In the background stood Henderson, the perfect butler.

"It is perhaps opportune," Mr. Fentolin said quietly, "that you all whom I trust should be present here together. I wish you to understand one thing. You have, I believe, in my employ learned the gift of silence. It is to be exercised with regard to a certain visitor brought here by my nephew, a visitor whom I regret to say is now lying seriously ill."

There was absolute silence. Doctor Sarson alone

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turned from the window as though about to speak, but met Mr. Fentolin's eye and at once resumed his position.

"I rely upon you all," Mr. Fentolin continued softly. "Henderson, you, perhaps, have the most difficult task, for you have the servants to control. Nevertheless, I rely upon you, also. If one word of this visitor's presence here leaks out even so far as the village, out they go, every one of them. I will not have a servant in the place who does not respect my wishes. You can give any reason you like for my orders. It is a whim. I have whims, and I choose to pay for them. You are all better paid than any man breathing could pay you. In return I ask only for your implicit obedience."

He stretched out his hand and took a cigarette from a curiously carved ivory box which stood by his side. He tapped it gently upon the table and looked up.

"I think, sir," Henderson said respectfully, "that I can answer for the servants. Being mostly foreigners, they see little or nothing of the village people."

No one else made any remark. It was strange to see how dominated they all were by that queer little fragment of humanity, whose head scarcely reached a foot above the table before which he sat. They departed silently, almost abjectly, dismissed with a single wave of the hand. Mr. Fentolin beckoned his secretary to remain. She came a little nearer.

"Sit down, Lucy," he ordered.

She seated herself a few feet away from him. Mr. Fentolin watched her for several moments. He himself had his back to the light. The woman, on the

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other hand, was facing it. The windows were high, and the curtains were drawn back to their fullest extent. A cold stream of northern light fell upon her face. Mr. Fentolin gazed at her and nodded his head slightly.

"My dear Lucy," he declared, "you are wonderful — a perfect cameo, a gem. To look at you now, with your delightful white hair and your flawless skin, one would never believe that you had ever spoken a single angry word, that you had ever felt the blood flow through your veins, or that your eyes had ever looked upon the gentle things of life."

She looked at him, still without speech. The immobility of her face was indeed a marvellous thing. Mr. Fentolin's expression darkened.

"Sometimes," he murmured softly, "I think that if I had strong fingers — really strong fingers, you know, Lucy — I should want to take you by the throat and hold you tighter and tighter, until your breath came fast, and your eyes came out from their shadows."

She turned over a few pages of her notebook. To all appearance she had not heard a word.

"To-day," she announced, "is the fourth of April. Shall I send out the various checks to those men in Paris, New York, Frankfort, St. Petersburg, and Tokio?"

"You can send the checks," he told her. "Be sure that you draw them, as usual, upon the Crédit Lyonaise and in the name you know of. Say to Lebonaitre of Paris that you consider his last reports faulty. No mention was made of Monsieur C's visit to the Russian Embassy, or of the supper

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party given to the Baron von Erlstein by a certain Russian gentleman. Warn him, if you please, that reports with such omissions are useless to me."

She wrote a few words in her book.

"You made a note of that?"

She raised her head.

"I do not make mistakes," she said.

His eyebrows were drawn together. This was his work, he told himself, this magnificent physical subjection. Yet his inability to stir her sometimes maddened him.

"You know who is in this house?" he asked. "You know the name of my unknown guest?"

"I know nothing," she replied. "His presence does not interest me."

"Supposing I desire you to know?" he persisted, leaning a little forward. "Supposing I tell you that it is your duty to know?"

"Then," she said, "I should tell you that I believe him to be the special envoy from New York to The Hague, or whatever place on the Continent this coming conference is to be held at."

"Right, woman!" Mr. Fentolin answered sharply. "Right! It is the special envoy. He has his mandate with him. I have them both — the man and his mandate. Can you guess what I am going to do with them?"

"It is not difficult," she replied. "Your methods are scarcely original. His mandate to the flames, and his body to the sea!"

She raised her eyes as she spoke and looked over Mr. Fentolin's shoulder, across the marshland to the grey stretch of ocean. Her eyes became fixed. It

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was not possible to say that they held any expression, and yet one felt that she saw beneath the grey waves, even to the rocks and caverns below.

"It does not terrify you, then," he asked curiously, "to think that a man under this roof is about to die?"

"Why should it?" she retorted. "Death does not frighten me — my own or anybody else's. Does it frighten you?"

His face was suddenly livid, his eyes full of fierce anger. His lips twitched. He struck the table before him.

"Beast of a woman!" he shouted. "You ghoul! How dare you! How dare you —"

He stopped short. He passed his hand across his forehead. All the time the woman remained unmoved.

"Do you know," he muttered, his voice still shaking a little, "that I believe sometimes I am afraid of you? How would you like to see me there, eh, down at the bottom of that hungry sea? You watch sometimes so fixedly. You'd miss me, wouldn't you? I am a good master, you know. I pay well. You've been with me a good many years. You were a different sort of woman when you first came."

"Yes," she admitted, "I was a different sort of woman."

"You don't remember those days, I suppose," he went on, "the days when you had brown hair, when you used to carry roses about and sing to yourself while you beat your work out of that wretched typewriter?"

"No," she answered, "I do not remember those

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days. They do not belong to me. It is some other woman you are thinking of."

Their eyes met. Mr. Fentolin turned away first. He struck the bell at his elbow. She rose at once.

"Be off!" he ordered. "When you look at me like that, you send shivers through me! You'll have to go; I can see you'll have to go. I can't keep you any longer. You are the only person on the face of the earth who dares to say things to me which make me think, the only person who doesn't shrink at the sound of my voice. You'll have to go. Send Sarson to me at once. You've upset me!"

She listened to his words in expressionless silence. When he had finished, carrying her book in her hand, she very quietly moved towards the door. He watched her, leaning a little forward in his chair, his lips parted, his eyes threatening. She walked with steady, even footsteps. She carried herself with almost machine-like erectness; her skirts were noiseless. She had the trick of turning the handle of the door in perfect silence. He heard her calm voice in the hall.

"Doctor Sarson is to go to Mr. Fentolin."

Mr. Fentolin sat quite still, feeling his own pulse.

"That woman," he muttered to himself, "that woman — some day I shouldn't be surprised if she really —"

He paused. The doctor had entered the room.

"I am upset, Sarson," he declared. "Come and feel my pulse quickly. That woman has upset me."

"Miss Price?"

"Miss Price, d—n it! Lucy — yes!"

"It seems unlike her," the doctor remarked. "I

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have never heard her utter a useless syllable in my life."

Mr. Fentolin held out his wrist.

"It's what she doesn't say," he muttered.

The doctor produced his watch. In less than a minute he put it away.

"This is quite unnecessary," he pronounced. "Your pulse is wonderful."

"Not hurried? No signs of palpitation?"

"You have seven or eight footmen, all young men," Doctor Sarson replied drily. "I will wager that there isn't one of them has a pulse so vigorous as yours."

Mr. Fentolin leaned a little back in his chair. An expression of satisfaction crept over his face.

"You reassure me, my dear Sarson. That is excellent. What of our patient?"

"There is no change."

"I am afraid," Mr. Fentolin sighed, "that we shall have trouble with him. These strong people always give trouble."

"It will be just the same in the long run," the doctor remarked, shrugging his shoulders.

Mr. Fentolin held up his finger.

"Listen! A motor-car, I believe?"

"It is Miss Fentolin who is just arriving," the doctor announced. "I saw the car coming as I crossed the hall."

Mr. Fentolin nodded gently.

"Indeed?" he replied. "Indeed? So my dear niece has returned. Open the door, friend Sarson. Open the door, if you please. She will be anxious to see me. We must summon her."

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